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TAGS: [IS](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: SPEAKER BERRI HALF-HEARTEDLY DEFENDS
HIZBALLAH'S ACTIONS, BUT UNDERSTANDS NEED FOR CONSTRAINT

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Speaker Nabih Berri tried to explain Hizballah's November 21 attack on an Israeli position in the Blue Line village of Ghajjar as merely a response to Israeli military activity earlier in the month. Yet Berri indicated he understood that Hizballah's aggression in Ghajjar, and its subsequent fiery rhetoric on martyrdom, were counter-productive and destabilizing to Lebanon. Berri said that even though he wanted to issue public statements to that effect, he could not. He still believes it is in everyone's interest to keep Hizballah inside the government, but realizes this will require better coordination among himself, Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt to balance Hizballah's growing power. In discussing a possible Michel Aoun-Jumblatt reconciliation, Berri hinted that he could publicly break with Hizballah over an anticipated by-election for one Parliamentary seat. Berri also said he is trying to work with the Siniora government to deliver measurable progress, such as a recent energy transaction with the Gulf Emirates that will help the GOL lower the price of heating fuel this winter. The Speaker also promised to join Siniora in supporting an extension of the UNIIIC mission in Lebanon, despite his strongly expressed feeling that they were "sons-of-bitches" who may be trying to implicate him in some manner in the Hariri assassination. Berri was convinced that a "secret deal" involving Syria, the UNIIIC, and the U.S. had been reached, and that this was the real reason behind Syria's last minute agreement with Detlev Mehlis. Finally, Berri confided that in a meeting held last week, former Lebanese Forces leader Samir Ja'ja and Druse leader Walid Jumblatt agreed not to pursue for now the ouster of President Emile Lahoud. End summary.

¶2. (U) Speaker of Parliament and leader of the Amal Shia movement, Nabih Berri, met with the Ambassador and Poloff on November 28 at Berri's residence in West Beirut. He acknowledged the Embassy's invitation to meet with CODEL Hagel on December 3 and said he looked forward to discussing issues with them.

HIZBALLAH'S RATIONALIZATION

¶3. (C) In response to a question regarding Hizballah's motivation for its November 21 aggression against Israeli positions, Speaker Berri reacted with a gesture of frustration and launched into a protracted (and possibly rehearsed) explanation that struck us as more half-hearted than usual. He reviewed for the Ambassador a list of recent Israeli "provocations" -- IDF naval activity close offshore Sidon; high-level, reconnaissance overflights over the Biqa and south Lebanon; extended artillery firing close to the Blue Line; and low-altitude supersonic flights -- all of which he felt gave Hizballah an "excuse" to retaliate, in order to prove they were not "weak." Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah made his point on November 25. But Berri did acknowledge there was a considerable difference between the non-lethal nature of recent Israeli activity compared to

Hizballah's pre-meditated, lethal attack of November 21. The Speaker expressed a not so subtle fear of Hizballah's real intentions, but rhetorically asked what could he do in the face of such power. Berri implied that if he could show that Hizballah's actions were not justified, he would speak out against their destabilizing effect. (Note: Playing a surprising and refreshingly constructive role, Berri did assist the Embassy and the Siniora government in dampening tensions during last week's events by acting as an intermediary with Hizballah. But it is clear he fears stepping beyond that role, despite the seriousness of more aggressive Hizballah policies in Lebanon. End note.)

¶4. (C) Because of the stakes involved, Speaker Berri insisted he was now trying to work more cooperatively with Prime Minister Siniora and his government. In fact, he said he had just concluded an agreement with the United Arab Emirates to supply heating fuel to Lebanon to help ease public demand for lower energy costs. This USD 55 million transaction will help blunt criticism of the Siniora government that it is heedless of the needs of ordinary citizens. The ever-calculating Berri implied he will be cooperative whenever political realities permit.

STILL GRUMPY ABOUT "MR. X," SPEAKER
NEVERTHELESS TO SUPPORT UNIIIC EXTENSION

¶5. (C) Concerning UNIIIC and greater cooperation among Lebanon's moderate political forces, the Speaker related how his confidant MP Ali Hassan Khalil, carrying messages from Walid Jumblatt, had just asked him to support publicly an extension of the UNIIIC's mandate in Lebanon, and perhaps, the establishment of an international tribunal to prosecute those accused in the investigation. He indicated he would support these positions, but laughing bitterly, expressed contempt for the investigative "sons of bitches who don't understand the warm relationship that existed between himself and Rafiq Hariri" before the latter was assassinated. He described a complicated and continuing UNIIIC sub-inquiry into the now-infamous "Mr. X" wiretap, implying he had been set up by Syrian Military Intelligence chief in Lebanon Rustom Ghazaleh, and feared that he, like President Lahoud, was somehow being implicated in the crime. As he has on previous occasions, the Speaker professed complete innocence and said he welcomed the truth. To demonstrate his commitment, he said he was sending a letter that afternoon declaring his support for the UNIIIC extension. As for the content of the "Mr. X" wiretap, Berri said that he was convinced Ghazaleh had tapped the call with the intention of sharing its content with Hariri, as Ghazaleh worked to keep Lebanese politicians divided. At the time of the "Mr. X" phone call, Berri claimed, Ghazaleh would have prohibited Jumblatt, Hariri, and Berri from meeting together privately.

BUILDING COALITION TO WITHSTAND
HIZBALLAH-INDUCED PRESSURE

¶6. (C) In response to an inquiry as to why Hizballah was not criticized as a "foreign agent" when it was clear they received both funds and direction from Syria and Iran, Berri fell back on history. He implied that when Hizballah strategically claimed the mantle of the "resistance" in opposing Israel, the organization acquired a considerable amount of immunity from such criticism. He said that you had to go back to 1948 and 1982 to appreciate the position they now hold. But Berri did admit the situation with Hizballah was now becoming untenable and had to be constrained. The Speaker explained that he was working more closely with several factions -- Saad Hariri, Walid Jumblatt, Amal, and the various Maronite leaders -- to create a coalition strong enough to deal with Hizballah. He stated that even Jumblatt was planning to meet with Michel Aoun to shore up relations.

AMAL TO SPLIT FROM HIZBALLAH
IN POTENTIAL BY-ELECTION?

¶7. (C) In discussing the potential Jumblatt-Aoun rapprochement, Berri noted that Baabda-Aley MP Edmond Naim is quite ill and might vacate his seat. Deciding who to back in a by-election might be the vehicle by which to build a Jumblatt-Aoun reconciliation, Berri said. He noted that Amal would still back Jumblatt's list (in the mixed Shia-Druse-Christian election district) but that Hizballah would not. (Note: This is the first time Berri has indicated to us that he might take Amal in a different direction than Hizballah, in terms of elections. End note.)

BETTER THAT HIZBALLAH REMAIN INSIDE THE TENT -----

¶8. (C) Asked by the Ambassador about the possibility of a united front isolating Hizballah, Berri said that he still believes it is in the country's best interests to keep Hizballah engaged in the government. He explained how he worked quickly after Hizballah's walkout from the Cabinet meeting on November 10 to limit the damage to Siniora's government. Berri said he had heard about the incident and rushed to convince the other three Hizballah-associated Ministers to state that their action was based merely on "administrative" concerns, that is, that no one had a complete transcript of Bashar Assad's November 10 speech as it was then being discussed later that same day in the Cabinet. In describing this and other political maneuvers, Speaker Berri argued that it, "was better to bring Hizballah along, rather than leave them (for Syria and Iran)."

POSTPONING LAHOUD'S REMOVAL -----

¶9. (C) With regard to the president, Berri stated that, despite the diplomatic gestures expressed by the U.S. and the EU, the show of unity with himself, Lahoud and Siniora on the parade reviewing stand on Independence Day was good for the country. He confirmed other reports that Walid Jumblatt had just met with LF leader Samir Ja'ja, but then added they had agreed to postpone for the time being any effort to force President Lahoud from office. The reason, with which he concurred, was that if Lahoud was driven from office, it would make Hizballah anxious and that much more difficult to control. And in the unique world of Lebanese politics, Lahoud's removal could also push Michel Aoun into a deal with Hizballah.

ALLEGATIONS OF U.S.-SYRIAN DEAL -----

¶10. (C) The discussion closed with Berri pressing for an explanation of Syria's November 25 agreement with UNIIIC investigator Detlev Mehlis. "There must be a deal among the U.S., Syria, Mehlis, and perhaps Saudi Arabia," he exclaimed, "otherwise, it would be stupid." Although he did not receive the answer he was apparently looking for, Speaker Berri closed by promising to work in cooperation with the country's other moderate elements.

COMMENT -----

¶11. (C) Probably no single event over the past six months disappointed reform-minded Lebanese more than Nabih Berri's re-election as Speaker of the Parliament. As we have reported earlier, Berri won his position by relying on what was in essence a "confessional veto" -- the Hizballah-Amal monolith only permitted one Shia candidate, Berri, for the Speaker post that is always reserved for a Shia. While Sunni, Druse and Christian MPs, holding the majority, could have voted in someone else, no one wanted to defy the will of the Shia community as represented by Amal and Hizballah. Now, Berri could rehabilitate himself in the eyes of many Lebanese if he would begin to distance himself from Hizballah, so that Hizballah could no longer claim to

represent all of Lebanon's Shia. It would be easier for the rest of Lebanon to confront Hizballah if that confrontation was not perceived to be a confessionally-driven campaign. Berri is the key to the success of that approach. What Berri told the Ambassador and Poloff in this meeting was more encouraging than Berri's usual statements, in that he acknowledged distance between his own views and those of Hizballah. But we should not kid ourselves: Berri is a survivor and the head of a movement that now has now been largely subsumed into Hizballah. While we are convinced that he personally detests Hizballah, he is, at best, essentially a fence-sitter: he is constantly calculating whether his political prospects are brighter with Hizballah or with Hariri et al.

FELTMAN